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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN OFFICIALS APPARENTLY FLEXIBLE ON FULBRIGHT
PROGRAM: NEA DAS WITTES'S VISIT

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The newly-appointed Minister of Higher Education and the Secretary of State for the Americas told NEA DAS Wittes (in separate meetings on January 21) that the GOT views the Fulbright program as being extremely important to Tunisia's development. We noted an apparent new willingness to see the problems resolved soon; in particular the officials seemed to recognize the need to expedite GOT approval for doctoral dissertation research. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) DAS Wittes raised the Fulbright program during her meeting with new Minister of Education Bechir Tekkari and his senior advisors, focusing on the need for expedited coordination between the American and Tunisian application/approval cycles. Tekkari remarked that he had no objection to a nine-month application process. One of the Minister's advisors interjected that American doctoral candidates should prepare better and not simply send their applications to Fulbright. He claimed that much of the delay has been because the Ministry of Higher Education has had to identify which departments and universities were appropriate for supervising the research of each applicant. "If students could be in touch with a Tunisian professor and institution prior to submitting their application, and if Fulbright were to communicate that to us, we would be able to save time and meet your deadlines. Let's cooperate on this; we can both do better," he said.

¶3. (SBU) DAS Wittes noted that if Embassy officers had easier access to university campuses and did not have to apply in advance by diplomatic note for permission to meet with professors, we could further streamline this process. Minister Tekkari insisted that diplomatic formalities still needed to be observed, but said that he would look into ways to alleviate this problem.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to being positive about resolving the Fulbright problem, Bechir Tekkari and his staff were uniformly enthusiastic about expanding general educational cooperation between the two countries, adding that they see U.S. educational models for connecting government, research institutions, and the private sector as particularly relevant for Tunisia. It was clear that they welcomed expanded university linkages, more English language programs - particularly in the sciences - and assistance in upgrading the quality of higher education to enable young Tunisians to be more competitive in the international arena.

¶5. (SBU) Saida Chtoui, Secretary of State for Asia and the Americas at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the GOT placed a premium on educational exchanges as part of its strategy to develop and modernize its economy. The GOT would welcome more U.S. students studying in Tunisia and wanted to see many more Tunisians studying in the U.S. on exchange programs. Studies in technical fields like scientific research and medicine were particularly promising, Chtoui thought. She lamented that "only two or three Tunisians" were currently studying in the U.S. under the Fulbright program. The DCM noted that Fulbright exchanges were reciprocal, and DAS Wittes emphasized that the USG would like to see Fulbright numbers increase significantly.

¶6. (SBU) Chtoui allowed that there had recently been technical problems challenging the bilateral Fulbright program and added that the "U.S. is providing us with names too late for us to process." DAS Wittes explained the application process cycle within the U.S. academic calendar and thought that U.S. universities and Fulbright administrators ought to be allowed to provide student applications by January of a given academic year, but not have to submit them 18 months ahead of the commencement of studies, as the GOT had requested in recent correspondence. Chtoui denied that the GOT was asking for 18 months but underlined that at least six months advance processing time would be needed.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: We read Tekkari's and Chtoui's remarks to indicate new flexibility and pragmatism on Fulbrights. It remains to be seen whether this more flexible position will become policy. End comment.

¶8. (U) DAS Wittes has cleared this message.

GRAY